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# **Art, Belief and Experience in the Maori of New Zealand**

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## Introduction

The indigenous Maori of New Zealand thrived in isolation for several centuries prior to European influence and westernisation. The artwork they produced is indelibly linked to established cultural belief at the time. As a relatively simple culture, an exploration of these rich threads provides a clear insight into the relationships between art, belief and experience. These observations reveal issues of broader ethnologic interest.

similarities with other Polynesian cultures<sup>2</sup>, the isolation of Aotearoa with its unique features resulted in several centuries of independent cultural development.

Maori society consisted of tribes (*iwi*), each led by a chiefly ruler with a distinguished ancestral lineage, believed to extend back to the gods. The power wielded by these chiefs<sup>3</sup> and other respected elders vested with authority, was greatly feared by the aristocratic and commoner classes. The tribal community survived by living together in fortified settlements (*pa*) under the protection of trained warriors and supported by various domestic hunting, gathering and cultivation activities.

Spiritual belief was animist in nature, relying on a rich array of mythology and legend to account for creation and all that came afterwards.

Folklore tells of the Sky Father (*Rangi*) and the Earth Mother (*Papa*) giving birth



## Background

The Maori (*Tangata Whenua -- People of the land*) arrived in New Zealand (*Aotearoa - Land of the Long White Cloud*) between 900 AD and 1400 AD. Legends tell of seven great migratory canoes (*whaka*) that carried the original inhabitants from Hawaiki in Polynesia to local shores. Although sharing many

to several gods who defined mortal rules and were involved in activities that are the subjects of myth and legend. These are used to explain all manner of phenomena and to define social rules and conduct.

<sup>2</sup> The Otago Museum in Dunedin (New Zealand) has an ethnographic display covering several south pacific island cultures in a way that provides an excellent one-stop cross-cultural comparison.

<sup>3</sup> Chiefs led in religious and non-religious matters: it is not clear that the Maori made a clear division between the secular and non-secular in their society.

The diversity – yet relatively homogenous nature – of Maori art is reflected in items ranging from intricate personal adornments that displayed social status, through to implements of war and then to communal buildings used for ceremonial purposes. In virtually all Maori art, functional form is primary, with secondary decorative adornments usually drawing from the iconography of Maori myth and legend. These adornments bear direct relationship to the animist belief that everything has spiritual force (*mana*).

The culture thrived in its classic form until 1642 when the first encounter with Europeans resulted in the loss of four of Dutchman Abel Tasman's crew members in a bloody engagement. In 1769 the Briton James Cook established friendly relations, and by the 1800s visits by European ships were frequent. It was in this period that European influence began to alter the traditional culture and reduce indigenous population numbers: leading to unrest, turmoil and conflict. Much Maori culture after this period is tainted with western influence.

In 1840, British and Maori representatives signed the Treaty of Waitangi which established British rule, granted British Citizenship to the Maori, and recognised Maori land rights. Maori culture survived, but the inevitable hostility resulted in tension that continued to flare. The uneasy adjustment, and social consequences are dramatically played out in "Once Were Warriors", which bites into the raw nerve of proud warrior *mana* gone astray.

In recent times, significant effort has been made to recompense the Maori for lost land, and to re-establish and preserve their cultural identity. The active and visible role that Maori culture plays in modern society is a testimony to a nation that has been ready to take a positive stance in progressive social and environmental issues. The increasing popularity of New Zealand as a tourist destination – particularly by Europeans – is ironically providing ample opportunity and reason to maintain and demonstrate what is a unique cultural heritage.

## Art, Belief and Experience

### Maori Society

#### Organisation

The Maori populated both North and South Islands of New Zealand, and while there are regional differences, the culture remained fundamentally uniform. The primary social unit was a tribe (*iwi*), which were reasonably self-contained and isolated, although various kinship relationships between tribes were built through centuries of connections. Tribes lived in fortified settlements (*pa*).

The tribe was composed of a number of sub-tribes (*hapu*), which were clusters of extended families. The tribe stratified itself in an aristocratic manner, with a chiefly class of noble birth descent providing direction and leadership. The lower classes engaged themselves in supporting roles, including domestic activities. There is no evidence that lower classes were despised even if viewed as somehow having less prestige.

For the Maori, men and women were distinctly different, although these differences were not held in a prejudicial way. Men were believed to be descendants of the gods, with the physical strength and cerebral power necessary to perform the important and critical activities in society. Women were believed to be of the earth, and found themselves excluded from many sacred activities and assigned to more domestic roles.

Reverence for age was a central element in their culture, both towards men and women, and bound up with a degree of subservience to the elder, wiser and spiritually powerful chiefs. Warrior qualities were also held in high esteem, due to the importance of defence and tribal warfare. The greatest glory was to die in battle, and warrior training occupied a significant amount of time, with some scorn for the uselessness of ineffective warriors.

Most property was held communally, with the chiefly classes commanding the best craft workers and their products: much art was aimed at serving the needs of these chiefly persons. Fine cloaks, ornaments, weapons, decorated houses and domestic articles gave dignity to the life and appearance of highborn individuals.

## Activities

The Maori were a relatively self-sufficient culture, relying on hunting, gathering and cultivation to grow food. Every day life was practical no-nonsense business in both peace and war, with a dominating belief in the power of gods and spirits.

The constant threat from other tribes necessitated the retention of skilled and trained warriors, prepared for action: an occupation for healthy and vigorous men. Men also occupied themselves with fishing, fowling, building houses, erecting or repairing fortifications and other heavy work. Women were involved in domestic activities, including gathering firewood, fetching water, weeding cultivations, foraging for foods and other daily chores.

To various degrees, both genders were involved in the production of art. Every man could rough out an adze or a bowl, while every woman could quickly plait a flax basket or a mat. However, any work vital to social welfare and survival of the community was the concern of well-trained persons and this approach extended to many other activities.

A rich set of ceremony, ritual and cultural events were necessary activities used to maintain tribal spirits, and satisfy other social needs. In same way, all of these activities were connected with the basic need to survive and provide structure and meaning to life, rather than acts of fancy.

## Beliefs

The Maori belief system was comprehensive in accounting for all aspects of existence, and in defining a framework for maintaining social and cultural order. A body of historical myth and legend, with rules and rituals covering daily behaviour, looked forward to future generations in a completely holistic outlook on the world.

Tribal mythology tells of two gods, the Sky Father (*Rangi*) and the Earth Mother (*Papa*) who brought the world into being<sup>4</sup>.

*Rangi* and *Papa* gave birth to several male gods, who soon became tired of the confined world in which they existed, and so rebelled. The god *Tane* parted his parents, bringing the earth and forests into being, and staining the earth red with *Rangi*'s blood. From this, all nature originated.

It was believed that ancestors were descended from these gods, although somehow this has to be resolved with the legends of great tribal war canoes that brought the original inhabitants from Polynesia. Consequently, it was believed

The interdependence and use of myth, legend and religion as a means of accounting for existence can be illustrated through a characterisation of Maori oral stories.

1. The tapu creation cycle: the beginning of life
2. The Rangi and Papa cycle: the male and female elements and the birth of the gods
3. The separation of Rangi and Papa: the preparation of the world and origin of life forms.
4. The Hine titaama or Hineahuone cycle: the creation of plants animals and man.
5. The Tawhaki cycle: the obtaining and ordering of knowledge and the establishment of ritual behaviour.
6. The Maui cycle: the discovery of the world, development of knowledge and the establishment of ritual behaviour.
7. The Tinirau cycle: the origin of killing, and the mana of man.
8. The Kupe-Ngahue cycle: the discovery of these islands.
9. Nga Waka, Nga Iwi cycle: the arrival of ancestors, origins of the tribes and the claims to land, mana and chieftainship.
10. Nga Mahi a Nga Tupuna: the works of the ancestors and their genealogies down to today.

that all esteemed individuals had, by way of ancestral lineage, a relationship to the divine, and an expectation to uphold high-minded values and principles for themselves, and for successive generations.

The Maori believed that everything had a definite soul (*wairua*) and a fluid notion of spiritual "essence" (*mana*). It was believed that *mana* revealed itself in the efficient form and behaviour of an item: anything from men, through to manufactured objects, land and nature. In humans, *mana* seemed to be linked to modern concepts of nobility, stoicism, authority, influence, prestige, power, psychic force, charisma and presence. There are characteristics of the warrior-artist, the Renaissance man

<sup>4</sup> There is the notion of a universal god called *Io* who was responsible for giving rise to *Rangi* and *Papa*, but it evidence suggests that this notion was

introduced in the 1800s as an adjustment during the influence of European Christian beliefs.

and the shaman present in these individuals.

Of fundamental importance to the Maori was a sense of sacredness, known as *tapu*. These were rules and prohibitive laws used to protect and control access to *mana*. Rituals were often needed as a means of access, as any improper contact with an item could drain away its *mana*. Some objects were believed so *tapu* that it was considered extremely dangerous for an unauthorised person to even to look at them, and they were to be handled only by qualified and trained priests.

*Tapu* could apply to humans, as a temporary or permanent condition. All males, other than slaves, were considered *tapu*. The most sacred parts of the body were the heads, back and sexual organs. Women only possessed *tapu* at menstruation and during childbirth. The opposing concept to *tapu* was *noa*: meaning anything common. This then builds the general model where *tapu* objects must not be associated with *noa* objects, other than through rituals or modes of access: A *noa* object could damage the *mana* of a *tapu* object.

Related to *tapu* was the idea of plundering for retribution (*muru*). A serious breach of *tapu*, or any other event that harms the tribe as a whole, would bring a plundering party to the door. This party would beat the offender(s) and extract payment (*utu*) by taking property, and not to be visited by this party when social form required it was an insult and form of social shame. *Muru* and *utu* were manifestations of revenge, a behaviour that was held in esteem throughout the society.

Rituals were each unique in nature, being applied to particular situations and intensities of *tapu*. The teaching of rituals was controlled by the chiefly classes. Maori mythology and legend, together with *mana*, *tapu*, *muru* and *utu* provide the necessary elements for a system that preserves social and cultural order.<sup>5</sup>

One elder said: We treat our artworks as people because many of them represent our ancestors who for us are real persons. Though they died generations ago they live in our memories and we live with them for they are an essential part of our identity as Maori individuals. They are anchor points in our genealogies and in our history. Without them we have no position in society and we have no social reality. We form with them the social universe of Maoridom. We are the past and the present and together we face the future.

## Maori Art

As an integral part of social activity, art and craft manifest itself in a variety of forms. A strong tradition of oral story and dance existed, together with a rich history of visual arts used to satisfy the totality of cultural needs. Raw materials and design elements, many of which link with social beliefs, were drawn from to construct a spectrum of tangible objects.

### Materials

The range of material worked by the Maori is comparatively small. A distinction is made between hard and soft materials, as this division aligns strongly with differences in construction, use and belief.

**Hard materials** were generally worked by Men, and included:

- **Wood** – Wood was worked prolifically, in a manner appropriate to the properties of the wood in question. Hardwoods were often used in weapons and working implements. The *totara* was regarded for general carving, due to its durability and abundance. The *kauri* was regarded as one of the best ship and building woods, although generally only available in the northern regions. As trees were believed to be children of the forest god Tane, they were endowed with *mana*, and in the case of *totara*, rituals were necessary to appease Tane. This respect continued through to the carving process, as material was worked appropriate to its nature. The practice of working and carving was *tapu*, having rules and protected methods of teaching.

- **Bone/Ivory** – Stranded whales provided a wealth of heavy bone used for short clubs, cloak pins, fishing items and other objects. Ivory teeth from a range of sea animals provided ornaments, and wing bones of birds were used for neck ornaments,

<sup>5</sup> In Carl Jung's autobiography he takes about American Navaho Indians linking their daily activities with the rise and fall of the sun as a means of connecting themselves in a meaningful way with the world: if they stopped performing their activities, the sun would not rise, and never-ending darkness would occur.

tattooing combs, chisels and flutes. The bones of human enemy were often used in a utilitarian manner as a mark of revenge, and other human bones were used for flutes, fish hooks and bird spear points. The relative scarcity of ivory and good bone resulted in the material having increased value.

- **Shell** – Paua shell with its iridescent and brilliant greens and purples was often used as eye or other inlay in woodcarvings. Sections of shell were sometimes used to provide flashing and reflective lures used with fishing hooks.
- **Stone** – As a precious stone in its various forms, Jade was believed to possess magical power, and items worked with it were especially valued for their workmanship and antiquity. Nephrite Jade, or Greenstone (*pounamu*), was valued as blade material for adzes and chisels, and also found its place in ear ornaments, fish hooks and even rings for captive parrots. High quality Jade was used for ceremonial short clubs and batons – regarded as having magical power – and hei-tiki decorations, which represented ancestors and were usually worn around the neck as a display of ancestral pride. Other stones were worked including Oamaru, Hinuera, Andesite and Pumice; however there is little material in literature to account for these.

**Soft materials** were generally worked by Women, and included:

- **Flax** – The Flax plant grew in abundance, sometimes with leaves two or more metres in length. Its leaves could be used raw as strips for many purposes: garments, nets, fishing lines, and lashings to tie together parts of houses, foodstores and canoes. Prepared and bleached flax was plaited into mats, baskets, war belts and other articles.
- **Feathers** – Feathers of multi-coloured birds were often used in the decoration of fine cloaks. Red parakeet feathers, along with small tassels of white dog hair, were often placed as a kind of ruff around the long club (*taiaha*) at its decorated end. Small bundles of albatross feathers

were fixed to war canoes. Feather bundles were also attached to gourds containing preserved foods, sometimes serving as content labels. When used as personal ornamentation, feathers were thrust into the hair or suspended as bundles from holes pierced through the lobes of the ears.

- **Gourds** – Gourds were grown in gardens for food and for conversion to water vessels and bowls. Some storage gourds had wooden necks attached at their tops, and some of these were mounted on three legs. Some bowl-type gourd vessels were finely incised with *koru* patterns, and were often objects of special beauty.
- **Hair** – There were few hairy animals, however the dog – white or tawny brown – provided hair for long club and cloak ornamentation. Human hair was not put to use as it was on other Pacific islands, and this is believed to relate to Maori respect for *tapu* in terms of the high reverence for individuals (at least, other than enemies).

**Common aspects** in the working and use of materials included:

- **Gender differences** – The physical strength of men, generally meant that they worked hard materials, whereas women worked soft materials. The *tapu* beliefs also meant that men of higher *tapu* had to work material of correspondingly high *tapu*; effectively preventing women from working many important materials and objects.
- **Choice and working of material to form** – The respect for the *mana* of an object as a relationship to the respect accorded to ancestral heritage manifest itself in the rule that materials should be worked according to their nature. For instance, the working of wood opposite to its grain would not produce good form, and would be contrary to the *mana* of the wood, which is inherently the grain's direction as a fundamental aspect of the material.
- **The relevance of colour** – Colour was limited to prepared red and blue-white clays, sooty carbon pigments, dyes from swamp mud and various

concoctions from plants. Red is a sacred colour and especially associated with the gods and high-born priests.

## Elements

Material was primarily worked into structural objects, and the Maori employed a number of basic patterns, motifs and symbols to draw from for this purpose. They add a narrative element either as the main purpose of the object, or as in a support role, often to reflect the nature of the object, and its intended use. The importance of the symbolic meaning is represented in a division between primary and secondary design elements, with the former contributing most significant and complex meaning.

**Primary design elements** are symbols with strong mythological and cultural meaning, and include:

- **Tiki** – The *tiki* personifies the first “man” created, and all representations generally represent human form, often with ambiguous sexuality: perhaps reflecting the ideal androgynous form. The symbol is generally used as a dwelling place for gods and other supernatural entities, but the *tiki* almost always represented ancestors, rather than specific gods. The *tiki* usually has a naturalistic head and abstracted body, with no particular distinctive individual portraits occurring. Each carving usually had an identity in that it represented a particular ancestor or spirit. The thrust-out tongue represents a belief in the protective power of this organ, as a universal act of defiance: this further personifies the *tiki* as a representation of the culture.
- **Manaia** – The *manaia* is the second predominant symbol after the *tiki*. The behaviour of the *manaia* is unpredictable, it often ‘bites’ into the *tiki* head, or grasps the body with its upper or lower limbs. Interestingly the *manaia* never seems to be consistent, but is usually a *tiki*-body with a bird-like head. The interesting use of the *manaia* in a foodstore board – later described – suggests that the *manaia* may relate to a psychological concept, co-incidentally similar to the English word ‘mania’, with notions of madness, craziness, silliness or frenzy. The occasional *manaia* that resembles a lizard may strengthen this argument. Sometimes *manaia* is used to terminate paddles, or on handles of canoe bailers or short clubs.
- **Moko** – The lizard (*moko*) motif is rare, as reptiles in general were believed to serve as vehicles of harmful spirits, particularly of *Whiro*: the god symbolising death and destruction. Some *moko* were used as guardians and powerful deterrents to those who might want to steal or degrade the dead, and as markers of sacred places.
- **Marakihau** – The *marakihau* are monsters of various kinds, believed to lurk in caves on land, or along sea coasts, in rivers, and as a class, they were feared as they regularly attacked humans. The general representation was as mermen with sinuous bodies that terminated in curled tails. Their heads sometimes had horns, while spines were lined with jagged fins, and eyes were large and round.
- **Pakake** – The whale (*pakake*) often appeared on the slanting façade boards of storehouses in a stylised form, with jaws represented by large spirals. With whales providing the Maori with a wealth of flesh and bone, the use of this form probably conveyed the idea of abundance. Store house boards from *Te Kaha*, now in the Auckland Museum, depict a whale being pulled to shore. The ‘rope’ they use is composed of a string of *tiki* figures. The lower parts of these two great façade boards terminate with large *manaia*, which appear to be leading the hauling process.
- **Avianised-Tiki** – The *avianised-tiki* may relate to the association of souls of the dead with birds, as their spirit vehicles. The Maori particularly favoured the Owl (*ruru*) in this context. Birds served the Maori as guardians, givers of omens, and vehicles of spirits. Characteristics are evident in round, lidless, staring eyes, slanting beaked lips, and clawed hands that sometimes have talon “fingers”. Avian features are particularly noticeable on bone chests.
- **Dog** – The dog is an ancient motif, found abundantly in limestone rock drawings, but not found at all in

carvings. The *dog* served the Maori well, and in one case, the theft of a *dog* by one tribe resulted in significant warfare and bloodshed between two tribes. Perhaps the utilitarian importance of the *dog* was lost over time.

- **Human Tongue** – The thrust-out tongue is common in *tiki* representations, and also present in ceremonial dances of various forms where it represents an act of defiance and as a symbol of prowess and strength. It seems to relate to the strong warrior like nature of Maori.
- **Human Sex Organs** – Sexual organs were regarded as highly sacred. The use of sexual symbolism seems related to the need for fertility and survival of the tribe. The penis, especially in its erect state, was a positive indication of the virility of the warrior. Female sexual parts were regarded as having powerful magic of a negative kind. If a woman stepped over a sick person, that person might be healed by the *tapu*-destroying power of the female vagina. *Tapu* was also lifted from a new dwelling or meeting house by having a woman step over its threshold. Female *tikis* are often placed on door lintels, with the belief that by passing under the images, any spirits or undesirable influences in those passing underneath were neutralised. The Maori did not harbour any ideas that connected sex with sin or involved the exploitation of sex.

**Secondary design elements** are various patterns and motifs, however usually with less significant meaning, and generally supporting the primary design elements in a narrative:

- **Koru** – The *koru* is very basically a stalk with a bulb at one end, from which an unlimited range of patterns can be formed. The motif is present in arts of ancient southern China and South-east Asia, and especially Melanesia. The popular explanation of the *koru* is that it represents the unfolding of a tree fern frond, and in some elaborate patterns it resembles tendrils of other vegetation, especially in rafter design which seems to be its most prolific location. It is often combined with crescents, dots and

other lines. Links between the simple form of the *koru* and abstractions of Maori notions of existence may be drawn.

- **Spiral** – The *koru* as a spiral form became highly developed in Maori art, and there is some speculation on how this developed. This form was predominantly found as a tattoo pattern, seen incised on the faces of many *tiki* images, and on mummified heads of Maori warriors. The basic tattoo pattern involved large spirals on each cheek, and small spirals on each side of the nose. In genealogical lines, the double spiral represents primary descent through a male, whereas a single spiral is used for female descent.
- **Decorations** – Curvilinear surface decorations were abundant in Maori woodcarving, mostly in the form of spirals. The range of cuts that could be made with stone-age adzes and chisels was limited, limiting the range of spirals, notches, chevrons, zigzag lines, crescents and ridges. The four basic patterns are *Rauponga* (a series of dogtooth notches set between two, three or more parallel lines commonly used on house panels, particularly in the late nineteenth century), *Taratara-o-kai* (varied zigzag notchings that occurred with or without separating lines usually associated with store house carvings), *Unaunahi* or *ritorito* (small crescents set in grooves, that radiate in groups, often seen in eighteenth-century carvings), *Pakura* (named after the swamp hen because of resemblance to that bird's footprint, and reaching a high precision of cutting on certain treasure boxes).

## Objects

Objects produced by the Maori were primarily for practical purposes to serve all manner of individual and community needs. Functional form is predominant.

The **structural arts** consist of objects of significant proportion, and include:

- **Fortified village (pa)** – The Maori fortified village (*pa*) provided the tribe with a protective enclosure that was often strategically located on high ground. The *pa* generally had one major entrance, leading through common areas towards a central

meeting area (*marae*), next to which the meeting house was located. The general stratification of the *pa* ensured that higher – and important – classes were centrally located and more significantly protected in the event of trouble. Rituals were used at the entrance to confront incoming visitors. These visitors would proceed through the common areas of the *pa* to the *marae*.

- **Store houses** – The community store house protected special foods or equipment from thieves, rats, dogs, dampness and other potential threats. As the primary item of village prestige, it operated under high *tapu* and attracted the finest carvings and decorations. These were so highly valued that upon approach of a powerful enemy, the carvings were often taken down and hidden – frequently in swamps – to be recovered and restored later. Whales (*pakake*) and embracing couples are frequent symbols: suggesting fertility and abundance. *Manaiā* figures often adorn frontal threshold beams and side panels to evoke notions of spiritual guardians, the passage of time and thresholds between states of existence.
- **Meeting houses** – Along with canoes and store houses, meeting houses were a symbol of tribal prestige and as such, were vested with high quality content. It is interesting that meeting houses became prominent in the late nineteenth century, after European contact, so the influence of Christian churches is an important issue to keep in mind. Meeting houses were used for funerals, religions and political meetings and for entertaining visitors: no individuals lived in them permanently. The house is symbolic of the chief and his ancestors, and names given to houses often refer to a particular ancestor, and frequently describe the house as his/her bosom or seat of affections. As items of high

*tapu*, *noa* items were not to be taken into the porch or into the house: this included cooked food. The ridgepole backbone is symbolic of the genealogy of tribal ancestors as listed in a single unbroken descent line beginning with the founding ancestor whose representation appears as a carved *koruru* or *tekoteko* at front apex. The rafters represented ribs, the slanting façade boards were outstretched arms and a pinnacle mask was the *ancestor's* face. The ridgepole section over the porch often had two figures, male and female, usually in sexual union. These are depictions of *Rangi* and *Papa*. In the

The house as it served as a model of the Maori cosmos has been presented:

The front porch is associated with the mythological world of the past, since it faces out towards the ancestral homeland of Hawaiki across the ocean: Hawaiki is the source of *mana* and power, the source of human life and the home of the dead to which spirits return.

The rear or interior of the house is associated with the present and future world of the land and its forests, where the living find their livelihood. The carved threshold can signal changes between states of existence, and the threshold (*paepae*) across the front of the porch with the lintel (*pare*) over the door and window are carved with comparable compositions of alternating full-frontal *tiki* and *mania* figures used to signify a dangerous threshold. The *pare* is the most important carving, making the passage between two states of existence or between the domains of different gods. The *pare* often has *Papa* giving birth to the main gods, or the goddess of death attempting to gain immortality for man, but in general referring to the ability of the female genitalia to cleanse *tapu* power from visitors entering the house.

The *marae* outside is often referred to as the domain of the god of war, reflected in the hostility of debate on the *marae*, in contrast to the interior of the meeting house which is the domain of *Rongo*, the god of agriculture and peaceful pursuits, who calms people and ensures peace within the house.

The conception of cosmology can be applied to the human use of the house. Inside, there are opposing *tapu* and *noa* sides with former being the window, and the latter the door: the front of the house is sacred and senior (facing homeland) whereas the latter is common and junior in status. These symbolic orientations function to maintain social hierarchy and ritual status among the hosts and their visitors inside the house during meetings and while sleeping overnight. The chiefs always occupy the position at the front and close to the door.

porch, and within the rows of ancestral panels set along the walls, the standing figures of the support poles depicted particular ancestors. Scroll patterns symbolising eternal life spirit flow along the descent lines together with the rafters.

- **Canoes** – War canoes were objects of high *mana* that demonstrated and served as symbols of tribal prowess: providing an imposing presence in times of battle. For this reason, they were highly ornamented and commanded the best talent in the tribe. The prow often depicted children separating from their parents as a representation of light and knowledge coming into the world, though sometimes a trapezoidal type with an elongated *manaia* was used, possibly reflecting the oncoming “effect” of the canoe. Lizards were sometimes carved near the stern for commanding chiefs and others of authority to stand, chant and spur on the paddlers. The stern and prow ornamentation varied in style.

The **domestic arts** are concerned with day to day activities, generally somehow within the context of the structural arts, they included:

- **Gardening** – Art and culture, to a large extent, was made possible by the efficient gardening of crops. Due to the importance of gardening to the survival of the tribe, numerous rituals and objects were used from initiation through to harvesting. Ritual activity involved stone crop gods, ancestral bones, skulls and mummified heads. Ordinary activity involved grubbers, clod breakers, digging sticks, weeders and other equipment. Digging sticks, for example, had a crescent ornament on top representing the moon, which related to fertility in Maori belief.
- **Fishing** – Fishing was a sacred activity carried out by men, and involved ritual activity. The initiation of fishing seasons saw the use of ornate versions of artifacts by qualified priests in these rituals. Larger wooden-shanked hooks had masks and *tiki* images as decorations. Smaller one-piece bone hooks often had *manaia*-type mask carvings where bait was tied. Net floats and sinkers were fashioned in *tiki*-form, and an interesting freshwater dredge was formed from a wooden frame with *tiki* at the outer ends.
- **Fowling** – Birds were a very important source of fresh food, and provided bones and feathers. A fowler would offer the first bird of his catch to

*Tane*, as birds were considered children of this forest god and hence various rituals applied. Wing bones, especially from the Albatross, were used to make necklace toggles, tattooing chisels, combs, flutes, shell pickers and needles. Few fowling devices were decorated, however carved perches used to trap birds were.

- **Domestic** – A diversity of mats and baskets were created from flax, with no particular patterns of interest. Household bowls were fashioned from a single block of wood, or from gourds, but rarely from stone: forms varied according to their basic materials. Gourd vessels often have *koru* patterns, for unknown reasons. Some potted delicacies were kept in storehouses until opened for use in a feast. The display of these goods to guests showed the wealth and generosity of the hosts, so the vessels were often highly ornamented.

The **personal arts** have some overlap with the domestic arts, but nonetheless are primarily those held and used by individuals, and included:

- **Pendants** – The adornment of men and women of rank was an important matter of tribal concern, as it was in chiefly persons that the *mana* of the group was centered. Ornaments were hung around the neck, from the earlobes, or as combs in the head and had protective magical functions. The most evident personal ornament was the neck ornament of the *hei-tiki*, made usually of Jade. The *hei-tiki* represented ancestors, and increased in spiritual value with successive ownership. It was tied around the neck closed to the throat, and the finest examples were made of Greenstone, sometimes with paua-shell eye inlays. These, along with other treasured personal amulets, were often given personal names and thought of as living entities. Other pendants of jade were worn at the neck or from the ears, and there seem to be five main types: the slim, straight or curved form (*kuru*), stylised fish hooks (*hei-matau*), coiled eel-like forms (*koropepe*), *manaia* as single- or double-headed creature (*pekaapeka*) and the whake (*marakhau*). Some small chisels and

adzes were often so precious to owners that they had a dual use as ornaments. When the author was in New Zealand, a large variety of bone pendants could be purchased as necklaces, with design patterns and forms having psychodynamic meaning: the wearer would choose a pendant that best described his or her "self". The description was provided on a leaflet, and the pendants represented basic forms (*koru*, *spiral*, *fish-hook*) with modulations according to psychodynamic differences.

- **Combs** – Combs worn by chiefly persons were highly *tapu* and served as head ornaments; a means of dressing long hair; and as lice scratchers: head lice abounded in old New Zealand. Combs varied in form, with some constructed from one piece of wood or whalebone with small *manaia* head carved on the upper corner, and other made by lashing together wooden teeth with fine flax string. Certain combs became family heirlooms of such *mana* that they were highly *tapu*, and open fighting did occur over rival claims to ownership of particular combs.
- **Garments** – The majority of domestic garments (rain capes, dog-skin cloaks, belts, footwear, waist mats) had little significance, other than when used for ceremonial purposes. The highly ornamented war and ceremonial cloaks were richly decorated with feathers or tags, but shared the same geometric and rectilinear patterns of more common objects. These patterns included triangles, zigzags, lozenges and diamond motifs. Clothes for higher ranking individuals were more finely woven with superior materials.
- **Tattoos** – The tattoo as the most personal of all arts was carried out by artists of high *tapu*. Blood was shed from the most sacred part of the body, the head. No woman or man of rank went without tattoo except in very rare cases where the person was too sacred to have blood shed. An untattooed faced was considered ugly, and such people were viewed as commoners with no social standing. The facial tattoo was engraved using deep cuts made by miniature bone chisels. A wooden funnel was needed

to deliver liquid foods for some time afterwards as the face became so swollen that normal eating was too painful: it also kept *tapu* blood away from *noa* food. Facial tattoos consisted of major spirals with smaller spirals on each side of the nose, and sweeping curved lines radiating out from between the brows over the forehead and from the nose to the chin. Some warriors had large spiral designs cut over their buttocks and long rolling patterns tattooed down the legs to the knee. Female tattoo was limited.

- **Personal weapons** – Maori weapons were highly treasured by their owners, serving in battle and acting as personal regalia. For chiefs, these were important symbols of authority used to emphasise speech, such as by flourishes of short or long club. Short and long clubs were made from wood, whalebone or stone, with Greenstone being most valued. Both had extensively decorated surfaces, often with incised *koru*. They had fine sculptural form, primarily designed for close hand-to-hand combat with deadly effectiveness. A kind of short spear was also used, thrown by a whiplash that was a short stick with an attached cord tied about the spear with a slipknot. They are of notable interest due to remarkable figures carved on the upper ends. The most remarkable object is a ceremonial adze, called *toki-pou-tangata* that consisted of an ornate wooden handle with a long, narrow Jade blade often with a lashing hole at its butt end. The carved design of the upper part of the wooden handle varied in design but was typically an out-turned *tiki*, its lips interlocking with those of a *manaia*. A mask was usually carved at the lower end of the handle. Its use is not well known, but it did mark a man of authoritative rank. There is speculation that it was used to kill distinguished prisoners, which was a task of importance: to be struck down by a special *patu* was a point of honour, as slavery was humiliation. This may be a mark of respect to the enemy, similar to the offering of last rights.
- **Treasure boxes** – Small wooden boxes (*wakahua*) were used to store

personal valuables, and with such important content were highly decorated. Some were of a canoe form with *tiki* heads projected out of each end, similar to heads seen on prows of canoes. Chiefly treasure boxes were highly decorated and regarded.

- **Musical instruments** – Flutes are the best known of musical instruments, often used as instruments of courtship. Their sound ranged over little more than two tones, with the sound hole occasionally made in the form of a *tiki* mask: the hole representing the mouth of the *tiki*. Otherwise, some had a *tiki* head at the top, at times with a *manaia* linked to its lips: possibly an indication of magical qualities of produced sound. Some flutes in museums have notable artistic beauty.

The **ceremonial arts** are generally the most sacred of all, relating to rituals and elements of society that are at the core of Maori belief, and they included:

- **Godsticks** – Godsticks (*tiki wananga*) were in their simplest form no more than a mask set at the top of a peg, and sometimes – unusually – a head plus arms and for a while, *tiki* symbols were used. Below the ornamented parts, cord lashings and red feathers were added for ritual purposes. This sacred cordage and feathers made the godstick “alive” so that the spirit of the god represented could enter the object. In use, it was thrust into the ground or held in the hand, and at times the priest tied a string to the image and pulled it gently to gain attention of the god. Often they were used in sets of three to represent gods that were to be invoked for a particular purpose. There are seven such sets representing the seven principles of life: the supreme set (the three realms of existence), the general set, a set for the sea, a set for the earth, a set for food bearing trees, a set of *kumara* and a set for the body.
- **Bone chests** – These wooden coffins were made to contain bones, and varied in design, they were often carved from a single piece of wood with a *tiki* form usually of female sex, which may be related to the goddess of death (*hine-nui-te-Po*). Small bird

figures often appear, which are symbols associated with departing souls: these include bird-like eyes, beaked lips, three-fingered clawed hands and occasionally webbed feet resembling those of seabirds. Many have a canoe form, often with a keel ridge down the front of the *tiki*, relating to the idea of the soul of the dead travelling over the sea back to ancient *hawaiki* – the legendary homeland of the Maori. Sometimes, cut sections of canoes were used for this purpose. Burial practices differed according to the rank of the dead person, but usually the corpse was buried or left in a hidden place, then after a year or two, the bones were gathered for final burial. In the final burial, bones were scraped of adhering tissue then oiled and painted with red ochre. The occasion was marked by dramatic activities to honour departing spirits.

- **Genealogical staves** – These wooden sticks were fashioned with knobs running down their shaft, and sometimes tipped with a *tiki* head, varying in length but averaging over a metre. They are now rare, but served as aids for genealogical recitation, an important element of Maori society given the regard for ancestral lineage.
- **Kites** – Kites were often used for play, but sometimes for ritualistic magic. A Priest would fly the kite in an act of divinity, and omens were read based upon the kite’s movements. The subsequent advice given by the Priest would influence tribal action.
- **Monuments** – Monuments or cenotaphs were erected to the memory of famous people, used to commemorate special events and sometimes to warn people about trespassing over boundaries. Some of these were sections of canoe hulls, placed vertically in the earth as memorials, possibly linked to the idea of canoes serving as spiritual transport back to originating islands. Some were painted over with *koru*-type patterns.
- **Idols** – Symbols of gods were often placed outside a house of learning to indicate what was being taught that day. Stone images could represent gods: these items were not considered gods themselves, but just resting places of the gods. Material symbols

of gods were named *toko*, and these peg-shaped wooden figures were stuck in the ground during *kumara* (potato) planting, divination and other highly *tapu* activities. They were often painted with sacred red oche and had ornamental bindings.

### Activities

In general the highly valued skilled persons were the canoe builder, tattoo artist and wood carver. Boys were picked young, especially those of aptitude, and well trained in schools that were so sacred that students stripped off all clothing, and once inside they dressed in special cloaks for use amidst oral teaching. It was believed that women were negatively charged with *noa*, they could not come near work in progress. Nearly all art activities were carried out without hurry or anxiety to ensure a high quality of work.

## Relationships: Maori Society and Art

Through this investigation, some interesting aspects regarding the role of art in society have become apparent, and include:

- **The display of prowess, skill and perfection** – The products of art acted secondarily as a means of sublimating creative – and possibly meditative – needs. However, the productions primarily displayed tribal expertise and skill. The role of the canoe, meeting house and store house as a tribal “mascot” should not be overlooked in terms of how these are a symbolic representation of the tribe in many levels.
- **The support of the cosmological belief system** – The rituals, objects and symbolic forms all contributed to a daily awareness of the spiritual aspect of life, providing reminders of values to uphold and the importance of the past, present and future.
- **The provision of knowledge about objects and situations** – The symbolic constructs, labels and icons are all means to impart information about the objects that they adorn, or situations they surround. These draw from a basic orally obtained knowledge, known to be similar across all Maori tribes.

There are some more general insights, not particularly related to art, which include:

- **The totality of art, belief and experience as a cosmological construction for social and cultural cohesion** – The web of belief and experience provides an explanation for all existence. Rituals are beliefs were selectively taught by chiefly classes, and provided a means of defining social and cultural behaviour. The majority – without access to this knowledge – are unknowingly living within a system that taps and manipulates a fundamental human need for meaning. The result, however, is at least a preservation of cultural values and a sense of security and stability in a changing world.
- **Ancestral heritage and gods as the key backbone that holds up society** – The Maori belief system commenced with a creation myth, producing gods that then extended through ancestors to the present day, and onto the future. Fundamentally, this respect for ancestors as held up in the present ensured a continuing high quality heritage for future generations.
- **The psychodynamic nature of symbols and art productions** – The various uses of the *manaia* and *tiki* can be seen as representations of states of consciousness, with the *manaia* being an unstable influence on the otherwise ideal *tiki*. Similarly, the curvaceous flowing lines of various design motifs may be related to organic modes of free flowing creation.

### Excursions

There are a few interesting directions worth pursuing in greater detail, which include:

- **The nature of cultural integration** – A conceptualisation of how psycho-dynamics are merged and integrated into another culture that has a different means of sublimating psycho-dynamic energies could provide a model for use across various domains. It could be interesting to examine the model in terms of application to other areas of cultural, emotional, intellectual and

spiritual integration. The current westernisation of the world, through media and more generally information technology, is tending to a future society where regional cultural differences will still exist, but will play a secondary role to global cultures centered stratified by some shape of intellect.

- **Conceptual structures of primitive cultures** – the exploration of links between art, belief and experience in the Maori culture could form one part of a comparative study involving many primitive cultures, in which these links are also looked at, and a conceptual structure formed. If that structure is transposed into contemporary society, it may well reveal evolutionary trends in various forms, and provide an abstract tool to reason and predict the nature of various sorts of societies (cults, businesses, organisations, etc) as they come into existence.
- **The cosmos that bounds the world** – the interesting view of the entire cosmos as defined in Maori mythology provides a holistic account for all existence; something then explained by myth, legend and other artifacts: and now explained by science. In fact, there are alarming similarities between this primitive holistic cosmos and that espoused by science, not only in theory and otherwise, but in terms of the personalities and across the entire spectrum of social and cultural activities. The previous excursion, and this new one, may raise interesting questions about the nature and evolution of science.

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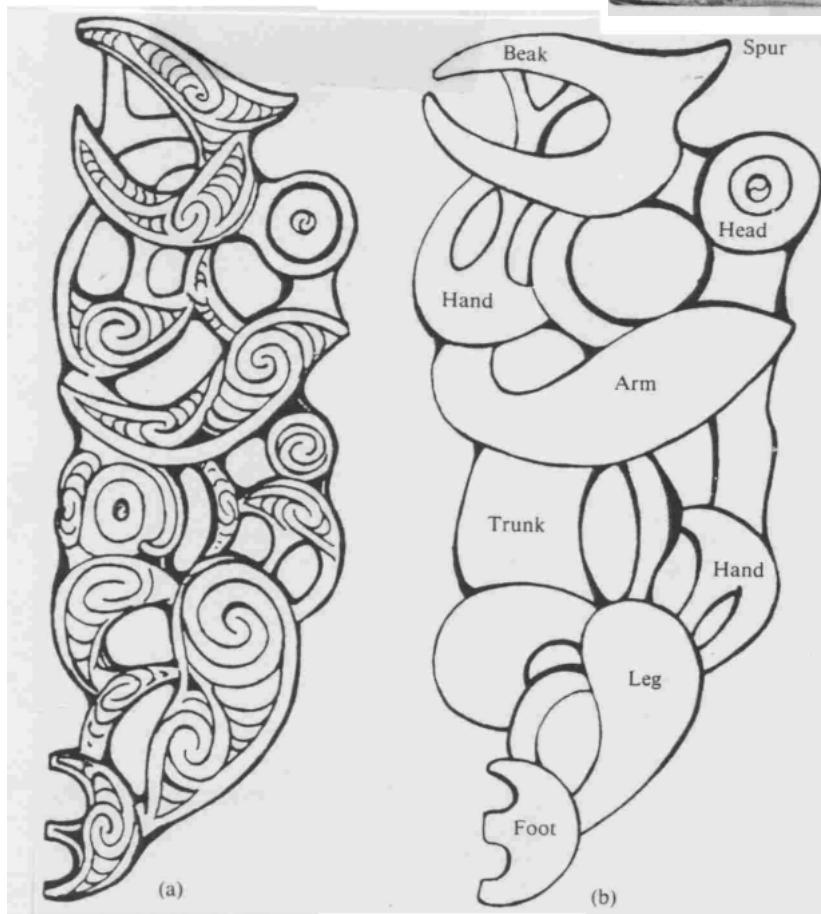
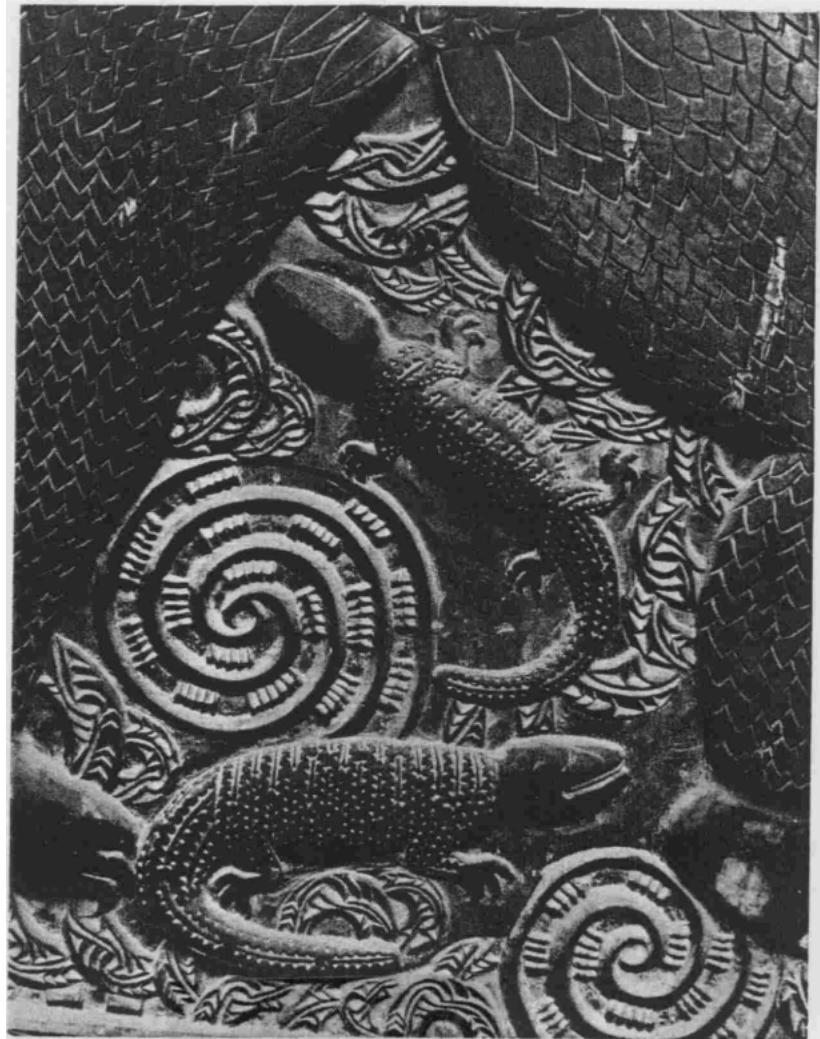
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<sup>6</sup>In the electronic version of this document these are linked to publication sources on the world wide web. It is interesting that with online databases and otherwise, referencing will possibly become a much simpler activity.

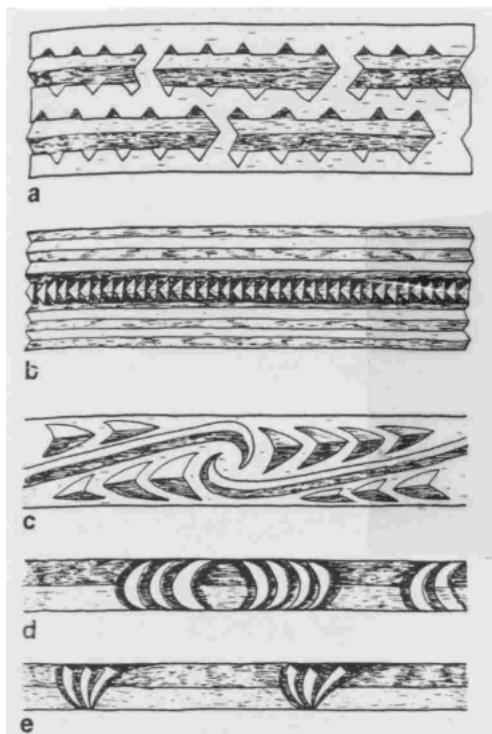


A large tiki figure with coupled small figures on the stomach. This wood sculpture stands two metres high and was the upper part of a gateway entrance to a fortified village.



The mania symbol takes on many forms, notably in East Coast-Bay of Plenty carving. Line drawing (a) is from a direct rubbed impression of a mania in the Te Hau-ki-Turanga house. Line drawing (b) analyses the parts of the same mania.

Detail enlargement of the lizards set between the legs of the mania-headed figure on the door from the Nuku-te-Apiapi house.



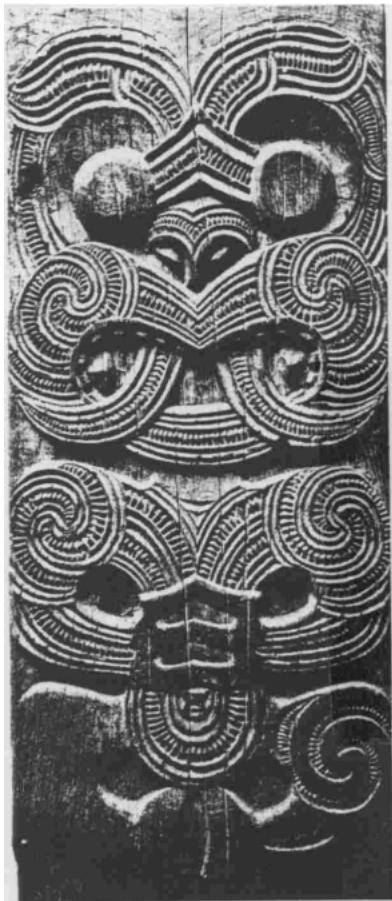
Surface patterns of wood carving.  
a Taratar-a-kai b Rauponga c Pakura  
d Unaunahi e Ritori.to. Drawing R. Jewell. After  
McEwen 1966.



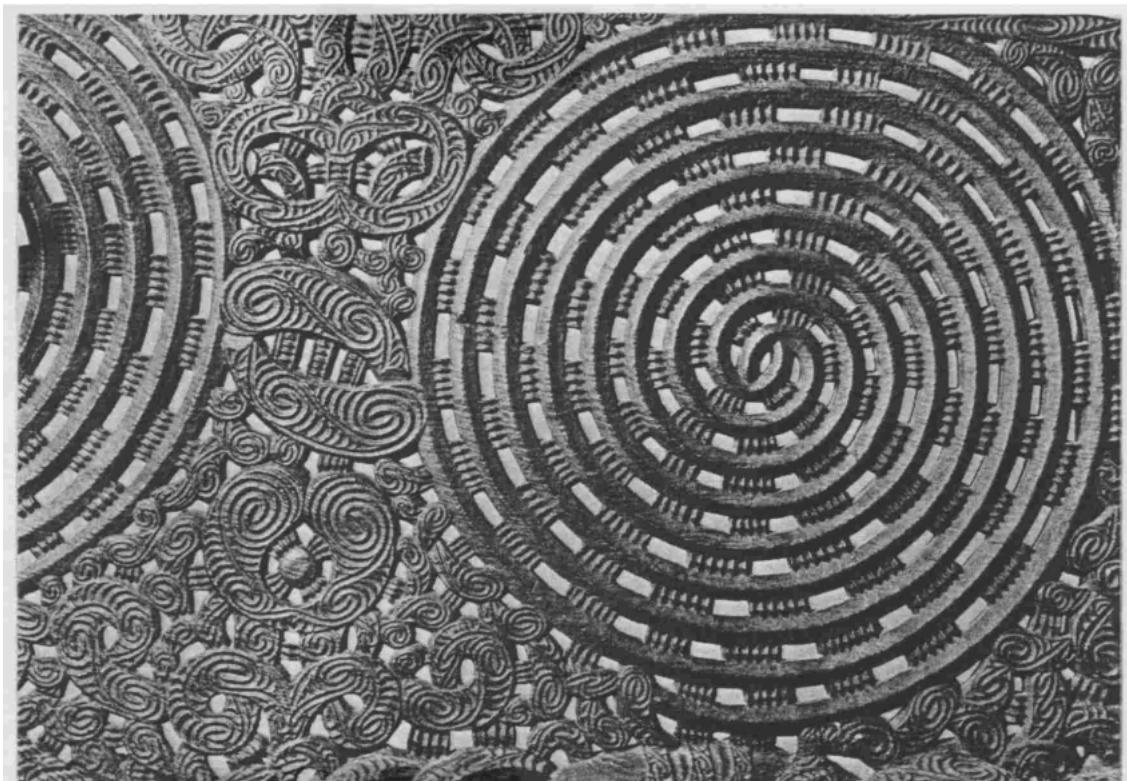
Birdman features so often found in carving are nicely represented by this mask on the heel of a ceremonial adze in the K.A.I Webster Collection, National Museum New Zealand.

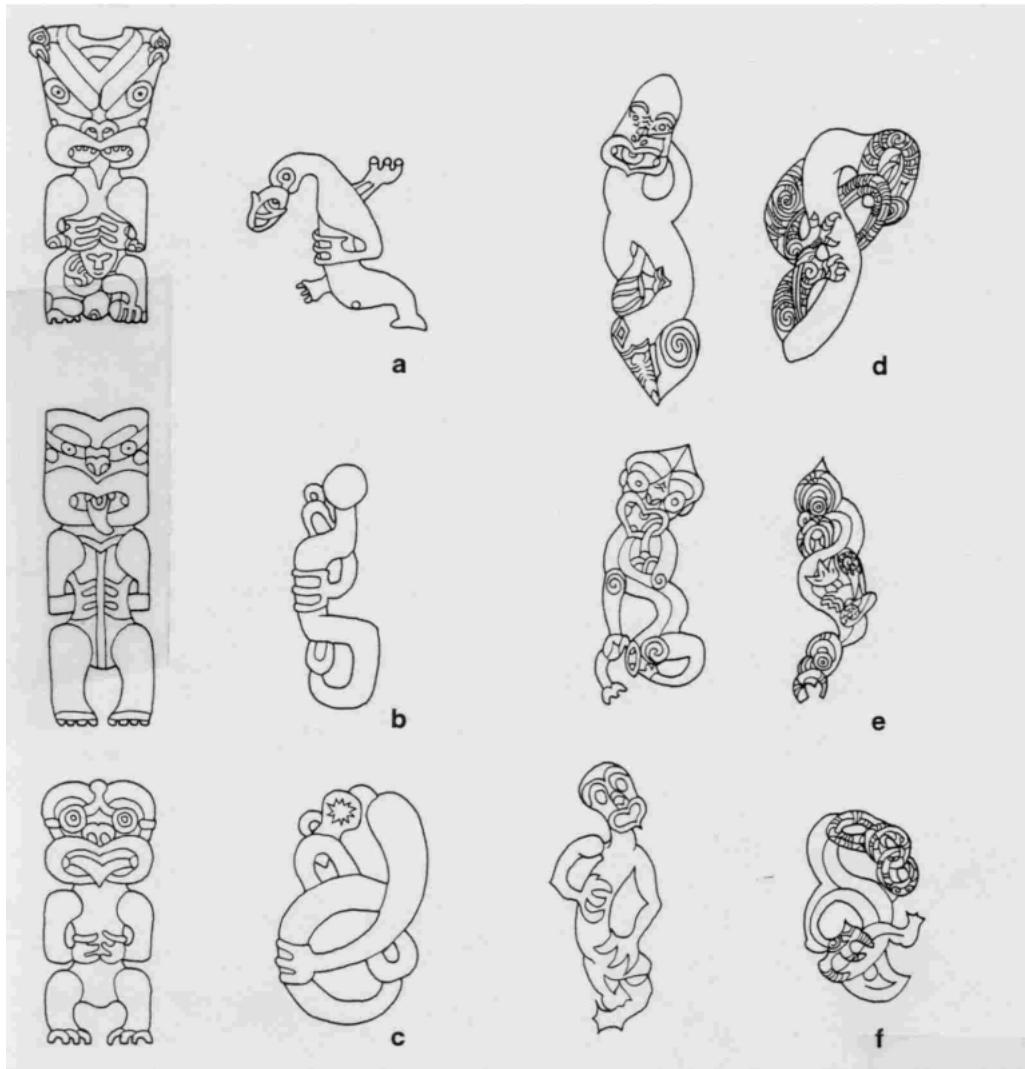
Strong open spiral work on the prow of a war canoe with intermediate *tiki* image of abstract kind. At the base a more conventional *tiki* is supporting the arrangement on its stomach.

*Collection of the Taranaki Museum, New Plymouth.*



A noted carving symbol shown here is the Koururu, a personified form of the owl (ruru). The distinctive avian features of this carving are seen in the staring eyes, beaked mouth, and feather-like ear tufts above the brows. The photograph is a detailed section of a ridge beam from Rotorua, in the collection of the National Museum of New Zealand.





Frontal *tiki* and profile *mania* figures illustrating tribal carving styles: a,b,c central and eastern 'square' styles; d,e,f northern and western sinuous styles.

a Te Arawa

b Tohoe

c Ngati Porou

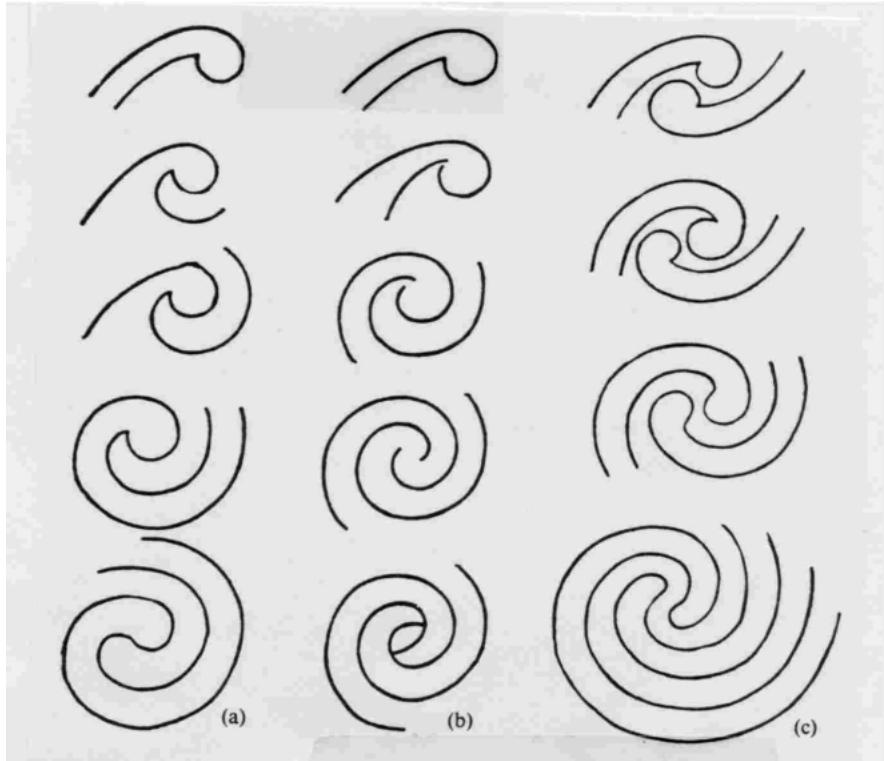
d North Auckland

e Taranaki

f Hauraki

Drawing R. Jewell. After McEwen 1966;

Mead 1986b; Simmons 1985.



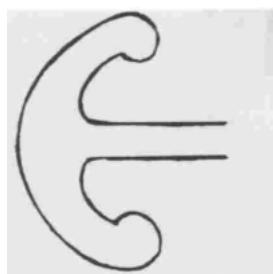
Line drawings showing a possible development of spiral forms from the basic koru element. After W.J. Phillipps, *Moori Rafter and Taniko Designs* (Wellington, 1960).



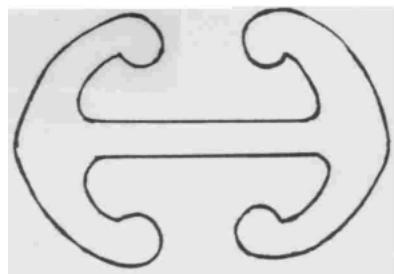
A section of the frontal base board of the Te Oha storehouse, erected at Mourea, between Lake Rotoiti and Rotorua, in the 1820s. This portion of the board illustrates a maniaia and a tiki in typical relationship. This fine structure is now in the Maori Hall of the Auckland Museum.



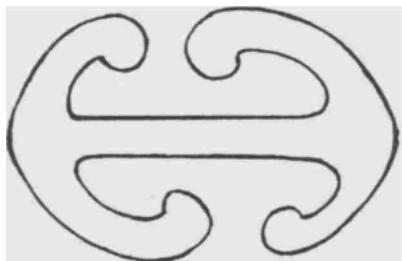
*Above:* Ancestral figure from the palisade of a fortified pa of the East Coast region. These figures served to express tribal defiance and as magical protective tiki. They were carved on a heavy pole, the base of which was set in the earth as part of the defensive palisade. This large figure, which stands 170 cm, is in the Hawke's Bay Museum, Napier.



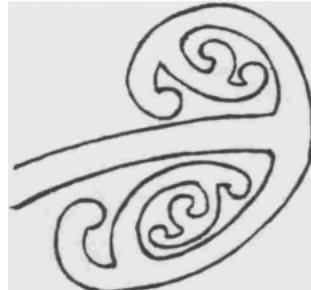
Balanced double koru



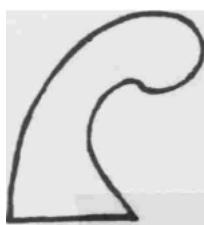
Joined double koru - balanced



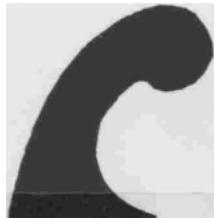
Joined double koru - unbalanced



Koru with inner secondary elements



Simple line koru



Silhouetted koru



Blocked-out koru

## The Basic Elements of Decorative Surface Patterns

These are simplified versions of the basic art motifs that are applied, in complex patterns, as surface decorations on Maori wood carvings. Ingenious combinations of different elements, and the diverse treatment of them, may be traced out if the basic elements are identified.



Single spiral (virtually non-existent in woodcarving)



Interlocking double spiral



Looped double spiral



Rauponga (parallel ridges with dog-tooth notches running between)



Taratara-a-kai (zigzag notching separated by ridges or plain surface)



Pakura (spirals connected by crescent-shaped ridges)



Unaunahi or ritorito (interspersed ridges set across grooves)



Single koru

Double koru

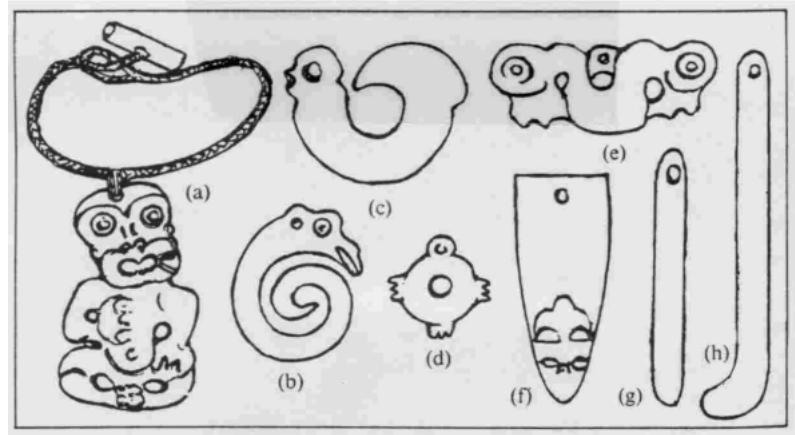
Complex koru  
(Example: one of the many diverse forms)



A nephrite hei-tiki with inset paua shell eyes, of magnificent proportions and wonderful design.  
Collection of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, England.



Domestic bowl in the form of a four-legged animal with amanaia head.  
Collection of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, England.



Basic types of Classic Maori ornaments. (Greenstone was the material used for the best of ornaments, but ivory from the tooth of the sperm whale was also much valued). (a) the hei-tiki ornament with neck cord and bird wingbone toggle  
 (b) manaia-headed coiled creature forming a koropepe  
 (c) a stylised fish hook (hei-matau)  
 (d) parrot leg ring (poria) of practical and ornamental use  
 (e) a double-headed pekapeka, resembling in outline the small native bat which is so named  
 (f) a rei-puta made from the tooth of a sperm whale  
 (g) straight drop pendant (kuru)  
 (h) drop pendant with curved end (kaueu).

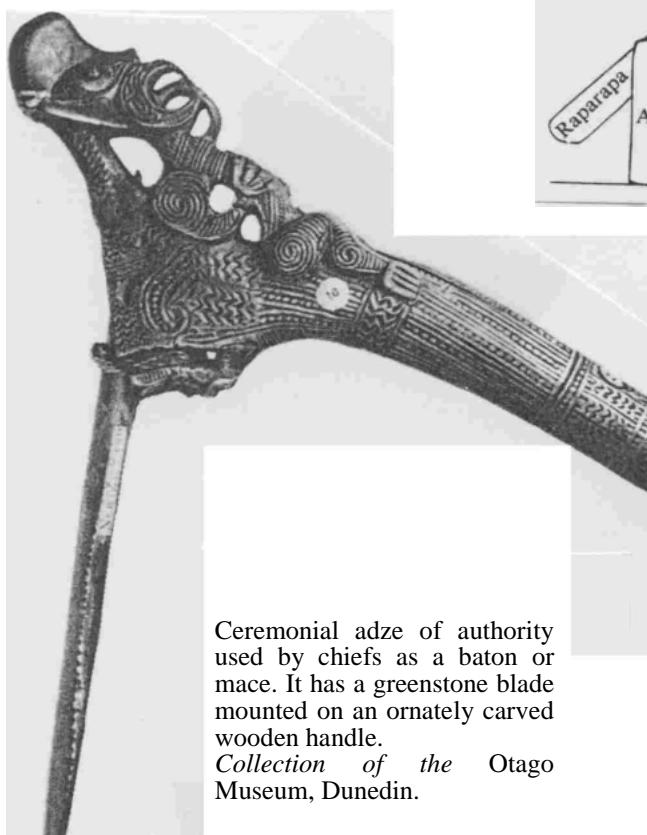
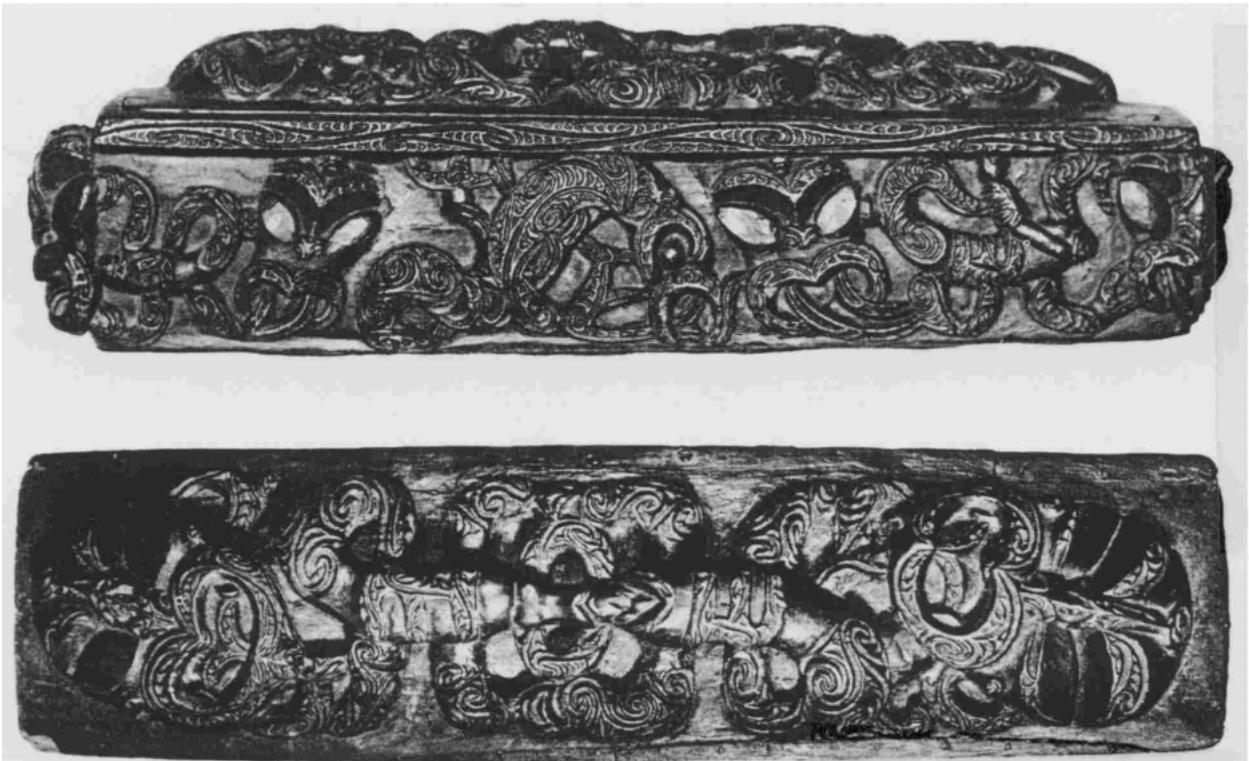


The heavily-tattooed chief Te Kuha, who was a woodcarver of high repute in the region of the Bay of Plenty. He fought as a warrior on the Maori side during the Maori Wars of the mid-19th century. Watercolour by H. G. Robley, National Museum of New Zealand, Wellington.

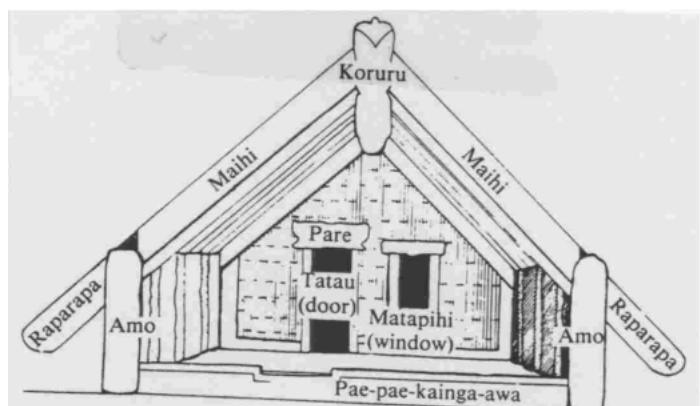


Two godsticks of knowledge, bound with the ritual cord but lacking the red feathers essential to their effectiveness. The left figure is said to represent Tangaroa, the sea god, while the right example is identified as a war god named Maru.  
*Collection of the Wanganui Public Museum, Wanganui.*

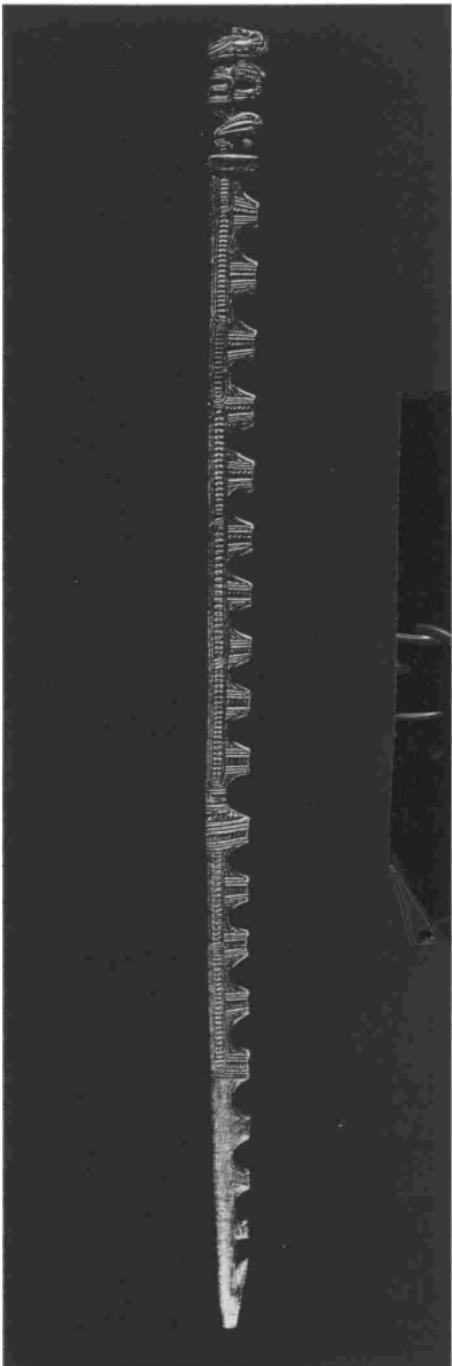
Large treasure box with designs of alternating mania and tiki motifs on the sides and male and female figures sexually linked as the motif of the lid.  
Collection of the Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, U.S.A.



Ceremonial adze of authority used by chiefs as a baton or mace. It has a greenstone blade mounted on an ornately carved wooden handle.  
*Collection of the Otago Museum, Dunedin.*



The parts of the facade of typical nineteenth- and twentieth-century Maori meeting houses. The line drawing, based on Te Hau-ki-Turanga in the National Museum of New Zealand, is from the author's guidebook to that fine house.



17 Genealogical staff, a memory aid for the ritual recitation of *whakapapa*, or genealogy. This staff counts eighteen successive generations preceding the original owner. BM Ethno. 1854.12-29.22. L. 103.5 cm. Grey collection.